

The Importance of the Bay of Bengal as a Causeway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans

By Tariq Karim

The Bay of Bengal: opportunities

The core Bay of Bengal countries today account for a population of almost 1.78 billion, while adjacent states with interest account for an additional 490 million. The “core states” (X, Y, Z) have a combined GDP of approximately \$7.5 trillion, while adjacent states with interest add another \$811 billion. While SAARC countries’ total intra-regional trade accounts for only 5% of their total global trade, ASEAN has a more respectable 25% intra trade while EU and North America boast 40-50%. One may reasonably imagine an economically and ecologically integrated Bay of Bengal community to increase SAARC’s current comparatively low figure, given their advantage in population, demography, and entrepreneurial vigor.

The Bay of Bengal countries do not have a cohesive community identity, yet. If the Bay of Bengal littorals could evolve toward comprising a Bay of Bengal Community, replicating EEC and ASEAN, possibilities for prosperity for all the littorals would be almost limitless, while hitherto so-called land-locked entities (northeast Indian states, Bhutan, and Nepal) would get a much-needed outlet to the seas.

However, the peoples of this region need to “rediscover each other”, revive memories of old civilizational, cultural, and commercial ties that had linked them historically in the past until the post-War new order rent them all asunder. They need to reinvent their regional identity, in a manner of speaking.

The COVID-19 pandemic shattered the value and supply chains that had fueled globalization. Peoples and countries understand better now the stark reality and need for developing intrinsic resilience by creating and establishing value and supply chains domestically, and extending them regionally across borders to countries in their near vicinity first and then expanding them in a concentric manner to embrace others beyond. The old globalization was essentially a top-down process, with the most powerful and largest economies playing a dominating role in driving and sustaining growth and development, but that left most weaker countries in extremely vulnerable situations. One imagines the New Globalization that will emerge of being a “bottom-up process, so to say.

The coastal shipping routes slowly being reopened, with agreements in place during last few years only between Bangladesh and India, and India and Myanmar, could, indeed should be extended to embrace all countries and ports of the Bay of Bengal countries. Bangladesh and India have just announced tourism along this coastal shipping route between them (linking up with riverine tourism internally). Cruise ship operators could develop different tour packages that would embrace 2-7 ports over varying periods of time, as indeed is a common form of cruise tourism in Europe and Americas. Trade, and new ideas would go hand in hand, once again, as indeed they have throughout the history of civilization.

The Blue Economy Potential of the Bay of Bengal for Bangladesh

A blue economy for Bangladesh would encapsulate a large number of economic functions and activities; most importantly fishery, maritime trade and shipping, energy, tourism, coastal protection, and maritime safety and surveillance for economic development.

Tariq Karim, Director of the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at the Independent University, Bangladesh, explains that “Countries understand better now the stark reality and need for developing intrinsic resilience by creating and establishing value and supply chains domestically, and extending them regionally across borders to countries in their near vicinity.”

Bangladesh has 450 miles of coastline with 200 nautical miles of exclusive economic jurisdiction. Bangladesh harvests only 0.70 million tons of the Bay of Bengal's estimated 8 million tons of fishstock. Bangladesh could also extract oil and gas resources worth about \$1.2 billion. Additionally, Bangladesh has a number of outer islands that could be developed for domestic and foreign resort tourism.

The "blue economy" contributes over \$6 billion to Bangladesh gross domestic product. Tourism & recreation account for 25%, followed by marine fisheries and aquaculture at 22%, transport at 22%, energy at 19%, ship and boat building and breaking at 9%, and minerals at 3%. The fishery sector employs 17 million people. Mechanized boats and industrial trawlers can catch fish up to 70 kilometers from the shoreline out of the total of 660 kilometers available. The rest of the area remains untapped, so vast potentials exist for gearing up technology and expanding capacity. Bangladesh still lacks the capacity or ability to harvest fish beyond 100 meters depth, or develop 'mariculture'. According to some preliminary estimates, Bangladesh could conceivably harvest around a trillion dollars from its blue economy. A huge gap between potential and current reality exists.

Apart from marine life resources, the Bay of Bengal is a repository to what is estimated to be vast deposits of hydrocarbon resources and mineral wealth. It is one of the very few such large water bodies whose countries have resolved all maritime boundary disputes peacefully. Despite this, the Bay of Bengal is the least explored area for oil and gas reserves, let alone prospecting for and suitably harvesting mineral nodules. Most geological studies to date suggest that Bangladesh is likely to have significant reserves, as the Bay is reportedly home to a rich core of solidified natural gas, known as "Diamond" or "Gas hydrates" or gas pods but geologically, they are likely to be at much greater depths than in the Arabian Sea area. Myanmar has already discovered significant gas reserves, as has India to the western and southern part in the Krishna-Godavari and Bengal basins. Bangladesh is still a new-comer to this field.

The Blue Economy, while key to economic development, is also subject to environmental neglect and damage. Policy makers and businesses, while seeking to maximize profit from extraction of "blue wealth", tend to ignore the ecological dangers to these commons. Bangladesh, and indeed all Bay of Bengal littorals, therefore, need to take note of the dangers for the health and well-being of the living creatures that inhabit the Bay region. Three important and immediate causes of concern are: (a) the development of a dead zone in The Bay; (b) the growing threat to the depleting mangrove forests that act as a force-shield against the ravages of nature; and (c) the increasing accumulation of non-degradable plastic waste. The nature and causes of the first two (whether entirely natural or triggered by anthropogenic activities) need immediate attention and deep research. The third danger is entirely man-made, and could, if left unaddressed, develop into a major threat for species survival.

Is it time for imagining a Bay of Bengal Community?

The Bay of Bengal is repository to vast marine life resources and also holds the key to energy security that would boost development prospects of all Bay littorals and adjoining states with interest. Importantly, it is vulnerable to common threats to its ecological integrity and well-being as described above. It is therefore in the interest of all to come together to address this common threat, and also work more closely in concert with each other for the sake of prosperity for one and all.

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